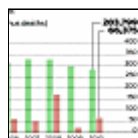


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California population growth slows

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California's population has increased by nearly 5 million people over the past decade, but that growth has slowed in recent years and the number of people in the state grew by less than 1 percent between 2009 and 2010, according to the California Department of Finance.

Also, over the past few years, more people have left California for other states than have come here, though foreign immigration and natural increases due to births have kept the Golden State's population on an upward trend to 38.8 million, according to the department's annual population estimate released Thursday.

Demographers say the trend of fewer migrants to California from other states is the new normal and past mass waves of people coming here from throughout the United States, which has been an integral part of the state's history, is now just that - history.

Steady exodus

Mary Heim, chief of the demographic research unit at the Department of Finance, said the number of people leaving California for other states has been steady and attributed that largely to the cost of housing here. She said that outflow has lessened somewhat due to a struggling economy in states nationwide.

"Today, opportunities are not great any place per se," Heim said. "There just are not as many people moving."

Between July 2009 and July 2010, there were 72,000 more people who left California for other states than came here. Those losses were outweighed, however, by people coming from other countries - both legally and illegally - and by births in the state. Overall, the California population increased by about 350,000 in the past year, with 81 percent of that growth new births.

Demographers studying population trends in California say the state will not return to the days when large numbers of people move here from other states and said that policy makers have yet to adjust to that. They point to the cost of housing, along with the state's 12.4 percent unemployment rate, as factors contributing to the change.

"The people who like California are the ones who live here," said Dowell Myers, professor of urban planning and demography at the University of Southern California. "The migration story is very much one of becoming self-reliant. ...We still think people are going to come from the outside and save us for free, but the migration data suggests that nobody is coming from outside."

Bay area losses, gains

Myers said that leaders need to change their frame of mind to, "Forget the migrants; focus on the homegrown. That hasn't sunk in yet."

In the Bay Area, Santa Clara County had the highest year-over-year decline in people leaving for other parts of the United States, with a decrease of about 6,800 people. That was followed by Alameda County with a decline of about 4,200 people. San Francisco lost just 378 people, and has a total population of less than 860,000, according to the Department of Finance.

Contra Costa County, Marin County and Sonoma County had increases.

Statewide, only three counties had overall losses in domestic migration and foreign immigration combined, although those losses were made up by births. Madera and Kings counties had small losses, while Los Angeles County had a combined loss of just more than 5,100 people.

Some counties had large increases in new residents from other states, however, including Riverside County and Placer County.

The Department of Finance includes illegal immigrants in its counts, with the data coming from the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C. The center estimates that California had 2.55 million illegal immigrants in the state in 2009, down from 2.65 million in 2008.

Illegal immigrants

D'Vera Cohn, a senior writer for the Pew Research Center, noted the numbers are estimates, and said researchers are not certain there has been a decrease, but are fairly confident the number has not increased. She said the number has risen since 2000, when there were an estimated 2.3 million illegal immigrants, "But since the middle of the decade the number appears rather steady or it may have gone down a bit."

California still has the largest population of illegal immigrants of any state in the country, she said.

And although foreign immigrants are still coming to California more than any other state, they are spreading more all throughout the country, said Hans Johnson, director of research for the Public Policy Institute of California.

"California used to be far and away the leading state of destination," Johnson said. "We still are ...

but California is not nearly so favored as it once was."

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